"Working Together in the Millennium"

U.S., German Firefighters Team Up for Training

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U.S. Air Force firefighters from Rhein Main Air Base, Germany, and firefighters from the Frankfurt International Airport teamed up to learn and practice technical rescue skills during a recent field training session at the German Federal Armed Forces barracks in Mainz. Twenty firefighters and five instructors spent three long and tiring days together, sharing a test of physical endurance, strength and mental stamina.

Firefighters advance a fire stream into the basement to begin an interior fire attack and search the basement for trapped victims. *(Photos courtesy 469th ABG)*

Day One

The training began on a cold, damp morning February 20. The crews began beddown operations upon arrival at the site. Knowing that not much time for sleep would be afforded during this bivouac, they hastily set up "home" and within 20 minutes were back to their vehicles unloading the remaining supplies. Chain saws, jackhammers, air packs and a variety of other search and rescue equipment, including more than a ton of heavy timbers, was swiftly staged adjacent to the site of a collapsed building.

The building looked like something one would expect to see in the midst of a battle zone. Parts of the exterior walls were torn down, debris and rubble were scattered everywhere, and massive concrete slabs with protruding steel segments were partially hidden by an overgrowth of vegetation. The three-story structure, which was built on a concrete foundation with masonry walls and reinforced concrete floors, was purposely constructed to replicate the remains of a collapsed building. It is the center of attraction for a series of training evolutions designed to teach firefighters the physically demanding and technically challenging skills of search and rescue operations.

Air-inflatable tents were strategically located in the north and south sectors of the collapse site. One shelter served as a medical treatment station and the other served as the logistics section for breathing air cylinders, respiratory protection equipment and communication devices. The training grounds quickly took on the appearance of a natural disaster site. Firefighters were now ready for action and were divided into four rescue teams.

Team 1, under the instruction of Oberbrandmeister (OBM)/fire crew leader Jan Scheffler of the Frankfurt Airport Fire Department, learned the techniques of building shoring operations. With hammers swinging and chain saws ripping through heavy timber, the firefighters precisely erected stabilizing structures to prevent wall and ceiling collapse of the training prop.

Meanwhile, Team 2, under the instruction of Brandinspektorenanwärter (BIA)/fire officer candidate Harry Trumpler, was busy breaching and breaking through 14-inch masonry walls using air-operated jackhammers, electric hammer drills and gasoline-operated masonry cutting saws.

About 100 yards to the south, on top of a three-story training tower, SSgt Joel D. Steffel of the Rhein Main AB fire department drilled Team 3 on technical rope rescue evolutions. Firefighters learned to rappel and perform vertical and horizontal rope rescue operations using state-of-the-art equipment from Rhein Main's Tactical Rescue Unit.

At the collapsed structure the lead instructor, OBM Stephan Syring, instructed Team 4 firefighters on tactical considerations and hazards of structural collapse rescue. Following a walk (and in many cases, a crawl) through the structure, the team donned self-contained breathing apparatus for their first of many journeys through a 70 centimeter diameter tunnel.

Two firefighters entered the small opening and advanced the length of the tunnel. After negotiating about 20 meters of the tunnel, the team was directed to turn at the first opening on the right, which sent them down another 7 meters in the tunnel system. This branch of the tunnel ended at a 50 centimeter square opening. Descending through the dark vertical opening took them between two series of "lean-to" floor collapses. Once they exited the tunnel system the three remaining firefighters, who had served as the stand-by rescue team, got to enjoy the same experience.

Throughout the remainder of the day the four teams rotated through each training station, eagerly learning the skills needed to safely execute and implement search and rescue tactics. Fourteen hours of hard, deliberate training took its toll. The crews returned tired and cold and ready for a hot meal. By 11 p.m. they were fast asleep, getting needed rest for the day to follow.

Day Two

Armed with training and tools, and with confidence bolstered, the rescue crews were tasked to demonstrate their technical expertise at a simulated building collapse incident.

The exercise began at 9:30 a.m. when teams were informed that a gas explosion had occurred in a three-story apartment, causing parts of the structure to collapse trapping five residents. Large volumes of smoke, produced by three smoke machines, billowed over the incident site.

The instructors served as incident and sector commanders for the firefighting and rescue activities. Their assessment of the site revealed that the structure had sustained heavy damage from the explosive blast. The east wall appeared to be heavily weakened and unstable and an uncontrolled gas fire raged in the basement.

Firefighting and rescue teams aggressively combated the fire and located and rescued the victims using the structural collapse rescue techniques practiced the day before. After almost three hours of strenuous rescue work, the incident commander declared the situation under control and ordered termination of the exercise.

Following a 45-minute break and rehabilitation period, the instructor staff conducted a debriefing of the firefighting and rescue activities and directed the reconstitution of equipment from the incident site, completing the first half of training activities for day two.

Next, the four rescue teams rotated through an additional series of training stations where they practiced cutting through structural steel members using oxygen-acetylene torches and other metal cutting devices, continued technical rope-rescue evolutions, and practiced ascending and descending the interior shaft of the training tower using mechanical advantage hauling systems and a tripod.

Meanwhile, crews attached to supplied-air breathing apparatus again advanced through the long and confined space of the tunnel system, this time filled with smoke creating zero visibility. When they reached the void space of the smoke-filled "lean-to" collapse, they observed search techniques and the use of thermal imaging equipment to locate trapped victims.

Day Three

The final morning of training was dedicated to reconstitution of the training site and equipment. General servicing and cleaning of tools and equipment and loading of vehicles ended the activities at Mainz. The convoy formed and returned to Frankfurt Airport/Rhein Main AB.

Objectives Met

The test was over, and as a "team" they had superbly completed all course objectives. Firefighters from two different organizations, countries and cultures had come together and achieved mutual goals.

This is just one example where the Frankfurt Airport and Rhein Main AB fire departments joined forces to collectively enhance their emergency response capabilities. The two share a cooperative and productive work relationship. The technical expertise and mutual support they provide each other is highlighted by their motto: "The Frankfurt Airport Fire Departments — Working Together in the Millennium"

MSgt John Olsen is the fire chief for the 469th Air Base Group Fire Protection Flight, Rhein Main Air Base, Germany, and was one of the instructors during this field training session.

Firefighters train on techniques to cut through protruding structural steel members.